

Environmental problems and policies in growing urban areas: a multidisciplinary approach

This special issue of *Boreal Environment Research* deals with environmental questions in urban areas. As urban areas continue to grow, these issues are of interest and concern for an increasing number of researchers, planners, decision-makers and urban residents across the world. A consequence of the global urbanization is that housing and infrastructure must be developed for the new residents, but at the same time a healthy and pleasant urban environment must be maintained — or in many cases restored — for the old and new residents. Therefore, a holistic view is needed on how environmental problems and conflicts arise. What exactly are the interactions between humans and their environment in urban areas? How can environmental problems arising from continued urbanization be solved? These are increasingly important questions in urban areas.

The papers in this special issue were presented at the Maj and Tor Nessling Foundation symposium 'Environmental problems and policies in growing urban areas' in December 2003. The symposium was organised in collaboration with the Spatial Ecology Programme of the Department of Ecology and Systematics, University of Helsinki and funded by the Academy of Finland. The aim of the symposium was to examine environmental questions in urban areas in a multidisciplinary way.

The symposium dealt with a comprehensive selection of urban environmental issues. Pollution and contamination of waters, air and soil, as well as noise and waste management, have received attention for a long time, but are still of relevance in cities. In addition to these 'traditional' environmental issues in cities, problems related to ecology and biodiversity are becoming increasingly important. Urban residents are concerned about the future of green areas and their ecological diversity in the face of growing demand on land for construction. Furthermore, environmental issues are more complex than before, and it is important to examine them also from human and society's point of view. For instance, it is useful to understand the history of environmental problems in urban areas. How did these problems arise, and how were their effects on the society assessed? This assessment will provide insights into how to solve the problems.

In order to gain a holistic view on urban development and its consequences it is necessary to integrate social sciences and natural sciences in studying urban environmental problems. In particular, a multidisciplinary approach is needed if we are to find policy measures to mitigate problems. For instance, questions such as what are the links between environmental problems and human well-being in urban areas, and what are the knowledge needs of planners and decision-makers, are of outmost importance. The outcome of the research will — hopefully — be a better and more integrated understanding of urban environmental problems and ways to mitigate their effects for a sustainable urban future.

Jari Niemelä
Professor in urban ecology
Chairman of the Organising Committee